CRUCIFIED GOD

March 17, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
I Corinthians 1:18-25
John 12:20-33

"...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain;...it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."
-John 12:24,27 (NRSV)

It really is foolish, you know: this notion that God has been among us, born like us, lived like us. It really is quite foolish, you know: this notion that God's being among us included a death like ours, like ours insofar as it was the end of life, but very, very different insofar as this was a shameful, violent and god-forsaken death by public execution. And as if this notion were not already bizarre enough, at least tasteless enough, there is the further notion, the critical one actually, that it was all for love, for the love of God. It really is foolish.

It takes us places we would rather not go. It raises subjects we would rather not discuss. Who wants a God who ends up on a cross, a religious leader who ends up publicly humiliated, a religion with the instrument of public execution as its primary symbol? And so we are ashamed of it. We disguise it, somehow hoping that the Roman Catholics will keep alive the truth of what happened with their ever present crucifixes and the bloody, dying body of Jesus still there, while we Protestants seem satisified with an empty cross, a sometimes sterile, stylized ornament. (Of course there's more to the story than the crucifixion. Of course there's Easter. But without this there is no story. "We preach Christ crucified," St. Paul wrote his Corinthian friends. Without this central event our preachments may be pleasant and helpful and uplifting - but they are not Christian.) If there is no place in our religion for the cross and what it means, that religion may be very supportive and successful, but it will not be Christian religion.

We disguise the cross aesthetically and also politically. It is not always easy to remember, in the company of his friends, who today are obsessed with losing the numerical battle for souls and bodies to someone else, that by anyone's standards he was a loser: that he managed to so thoroughly offend the political powers, the movers and shakers, that he got himself arrested, tried, convicted and executed. The crucifixion didn't

happen because he talked about love and forgiveness. It happened because he challenged authority, and in doing so ignited a flame of hope in the hearts of men and women. He was a rabble-rouser, a political nuisance, a threat to everything that was safe and predictable and socially acceptable. In the company of his friends, that fact is sometimes rather thoroughly disguised.

And we disguise the cross intellectually. It is harder to do but we manage. The idea the cross of Jesus represents is an alien one, namely that love becomes vulnerable and suffers, and that out of self-giving love, which is always a manner of losing and dying, new life is given. The world in which we live has never been happy with that idea. Success is defined as winning, coming out on top of the heap, having the personal will, confidence and self-esteem to do what ver is necessary to get there. Happiness is receiving, not giving; accumulation is the goal, not self-sacrifice. Self-fulfillment is our highest aim; feeling good about self, taking care of self. Self-emptying, self-sacrifice, loving so much that self is no longer important - these are alien and foolish notions... they could get you crucified or at least very badly hurt.

One day, the Gospel of John tells it, some Greeks came looking for Jesus. Now when the Bible calls people Greeks, it is not an ethnic slur. "Greek" means intellectual, a thinker, a consumate rationalist. Greeks showing up one day and telling Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" is like a research team from the University of Chicago sociology department visiting a store-front church on Sunday morning to try to understand the psycho-social dynamics of religious behavior. Being Greeks, what they'd really like is an interview with the spokesperson, Jesus: perhaps the three or four main points he wishes to make and a good healthy question and answer session. And what they get, the Gospel of John reports, is a peculiar discourse about a grain of wheat falling in the ground and dying and then bearing much fruit. And then a kind of embarrassing personal revelation about a premonition, and the fact that he does not like at all the prospect of dying, is toying in fact with the notion of bailing out, backing off - at least asking God to save him from what now seems inevitable. The incident moves from a simple historical occurrence to a personal matter: this young man is no more eager to die - even for his cause - than you and I are.

"Sir, we would see Jesus," the intellectually curious say. And what they see is the cross - with him on it.

There have been more volumes written to explain what exactly the cross is about, than any other topic... Atonement theories... Jesus paid the price for our sins; Jesus was our substitute. And central to them all is the anomaly that the cross is, more than anything else, a symbol of God's love.

It is the Christián secret: that God loves us enough to die for us, and that out of that selfless love of God, new and eternal life is born.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a powerful book, The Crucified God, which puts the issue with strength and relevance for our age. The best thinkers we produce have always had trouble with the notion

that God cares enough to become vulnerable. Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Greeks, St. Paul wrote. And in fact the notion was absurd to the people who were taught to think by the philosophers - Plato, Aristotle.

They weren't hostile to the notion of God. Not at all. Ever since Plato they were not hostile to the notion of one god, not many. They rather liked the idea. If there is one god, the philosophers reasoned, that god must of necessity be perfect, lacking nothing, wanting nothing, needing nothing. That is what perfection is. If God is one - that is what perfect oneness must be. The Greek word for that perfect oneness is apatheia. You've heard this before. It's the term from which we get our word apathy. But it really means the absolute metaphysical perfection of God.

Apatheia, says Professor Moltmann, is "unchangeableness, incapable of being affected, influenced, total freedom. God does not need the services or emotions of people for his own life. Because he is perfect he needs no friends nor will he have any." [p. 267-270]

God doesn't need friends. I don't know whether Professor Moltmann is a baseball fan, but that observation of his reminded me of one of the best pieces of baseball writing around, John Updike's account of Ted Williams' last time at bat. Williams, everybody agrees, was one of the most talented athletes ever to try to hit a baseball with a bat - and one of the most successful at doing it. He played for the Boston Red Sox. He was a singular man whose absolute purpose was to hit the ball with the bat. The presence of people, fans, was unimportant. So he seemed aloof, private, unresponsive. And he maintained that posture through two decades in Boston.

On the last day of the season, 1960, Williams had announced his retirement. It would be his final appearance at Fenway Park. Updike was there; Williams came to bat in the eighth inning. It would be the last time. The crowd rose and applauded for minutes. Williams did not acknowledge. What he did was hit a home run. It was pure magic. The crowd erupted for long-time applauding, cheering, calling for Williams to reappear and simply acknowledge the overwhelming gratitude of the fans. He didn't appear. The ovation continued, "We want Ted!" Coaches and umpires begged him to come out and tip his hat, acknowledge the fans in some way. He refused. "Gods do not answer letters," Updike observed. I always wondered what he meant. Revisiting Professor Moltmann this week I discovered Updike's connection. Updike reads theology. He know about apatheia. Apatheia - the metaphysical perfection of God. God doesn't need friends. God doesn't need anything.

It's more than an ancient philosophical idea, Moltmann wrote, and many others agree. Apathy, he says, is the major sickness of our generation: this compulsion of ours to build our security so completely that we need nothing: this cultural goal of protecting ourselves psychologically from anything that might make us vulnerable, might penetrate and cause us grief and heartbreak. We even want that from our religion - security, happiness, success - not a man dying with a broken heart calling out "My God why"?

It's foolishness, the Greeks said. The Christian goal is not to protect yourself from suffering, but to expose yourself, to open yourself to the full range of possibilities from ecstasy to grief. Christianity proposes a radical alternative, namely that you are alive insofar as you love. And insofar as you love you open yourself to suffering and death.

God, the Gospel of Christ crucified proclaims, has done it. God is not metaphysical perfection. God is love. God is love which cares deeply about human beings, love which becomes vulnerable, love which offers friendship and invites, wants, needs a response. God is not perfect oneness. God is passionate love - love which reaches out to embrace, love which pursues the lost sheep, love which runs down the road with open arms to welcome the prodigal son. God is not a philosophic proposition. God is love which knows and experiences the full range of human vulnerability - the pain of childbirth, the heart-wrenching love for one's own children, the pain which one feels when they suffer the joy and ecstasy of mature love. God is love which knows the heartache of an unresponsive beloved, the heartbreak because of love betrayed, the unspeakable grief when one deeply loved dies. These are the metaphors the Gospel of Christ crucified provides as alternatives to the metaphysical perfection of the Greeks.

Professor Moltmann cites in his book the now familiar incident from Eli Wiesel's novel about his Auschwitz experience. Motlmann calls it a "shattering expression of the theology of the cross"...

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp.

"'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked before me. 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer, 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows...'" [Night, p. 75f in Moltmann, p. 273,4]

In the death of Jesus on the cross, God is revealed. That is our faith. The promise is that life is the result. It is one of consistent themes in scripture:

-the person who saves life ends up losing it...

-the person who loses life, gains it...

The person who holds on tightly - to goods, to people, to bank accounts and job security, to professional reputation and community standing - the person who depends on these, holds so tightly that hands cannot be open, will literally squeeze life out, smother life. lose life.

So Jesus says here - with a flourish for emphasis -

Those who love life will lose it...

Those who hate life will keep it...

David Bartlett wrote in the Christian Century recently about the way faithfulness sometimes demands dying... for some people in some places in the world, literally dying. And for other people in other places, a

symbolic dying. "Dying to vocation can be a road to life," he observes. Our seminaries (and graduate schools) are enriched by people who in mid-career died to sometimes lucrative careers and decided to start all over again.

Sometimes dying to a destructive and emotionally deadening relationship leads to new life.

In John's Gospel, death and loss lead to life and Jesus is the one who demonstrates this process.

Popular author, Judith Viorst, in her best seller, Necessary Losses, suggests that human life is, in one sense, a sequence of losses, not only the very real loss of people we love but a loss "loss of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of power and the loss of our younger self."

Viorst writes with humor and poignancy about her mid-life crisis:

> "Why do I seem to remember Pearl Harbor? Surely I must be too young. When did the boys I clung to start losing their hair? Why can't I take barefoot walks in the park without giving my kidneys a chill? There's poetry left in me still and it doesn't seem fair..."

Some losses:

-laugh lines that remain after our laughing is through;

-coffee at 9 and insomnia at 2;

-pizza at bedtime and heartburn at 3;

-mid-life is a time of letting go - of waistlines and 20/20 vision - of our dream of becoming an Olympic skater, of reading the classics, seeing the whole world. We even give up hoping, she says, that we will succeed in becoming underweight.

> "We feel shaken. We feel scared. We do not feel safe. The center's not holding." [p. 298-301]

> "Lent," David Bartlett wrote, "comes to each of us on its own good time... It is not so much the season for choosing our losses as the season for acknowledging them. In Lent we pray that in our losings we may find Christ: that in our dyings and our dying we may receive life in him." [Christian Century, 3/6/91, p. 259]

The cross is the promise that in death there is life; that in every loss there is also God's promise of newness. The cross, with outstretched arms is the symbol not simply of human injustice but of a love big enough to embrace us all - a love that is not discouraged by our unfaith, our pettiness; a love that will never stop forgiving, accepting, welcoming until all are home and safe.

We preach Christ crucified. St. Paul wrote - a stumbling block to some, foolishness to others; but to those with grace to stand under it, those with courage enough to be vulnerable, those strong enough to weep the tears of deep grief and profound joy - it is the wisdom and love and reality of God.

A friend of mine attended a musical presentation by some teenagers from San Marcos, a Presbyterian ministry with Hispanic youngsters on the west side. She expected lively rock music and was surprised when they sang gospel. One boy sang, unaccompanied - a boy she learned whose buddy had been badly cut that week for his jacket, a boy whose own life wasn't worth the value of the sneakers on his feet - sang his heart out.

"How can it be
That thou my God
hast died for me"

It got to her a little bit, and so at the inevitable punch and cookie reception afterward, she went to him and said simply, "What does it mean to you? What does it feel like what you just sang - that God died for you?"

And he paused and looked at her and said, "Awesome, lady, awesome."

Or - more elegantly but no more eloquently -

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."
["When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,"
The Presbyterian Hymnal]

Amen.